NYC-DSA Albany Slate: Agenda for Decarceration

The United States puts more people in prison than any other country in the world, but it's not because we have more crime. It's because over the past 50 years, our criminal-legal system has been more concerned with punishing individual wrongdoing rather than enacting policies that reduce crime and promote public safety. Not only has this approach not made us safer, but decades of research has revealed it's done the opposite, destroying families, ravaging neighborhoods, and tearing apart communities.

In 2019, NYC-DSA endorsed and campaigned for Tiffany Cabán for Queens District Attorney because she recognized the urgency of ending this travesty and what it would take to do it. She understood that community safety is built on community stability, and that a criminal-legal system that locks thousands of people out of stable employment, bars them from accessing public benefits, and banishes them from secure housing makes safe and stable communities impossible. Not only does it ravage the lives of those caught up in the system themselves, it impacts their friends, families, children, and neighbors as well.

She also recognized what all credible research demonstrates but which almost no district attorneys in the country will admit: that the best way to reduce crime and ensure safety is to provide people with employment, housing, education, and robust public services that enable them to provide for themselves, their families, and their communities. Her vision for a district attorney's office whose role was to ensure access to these necessities was a revolutionary approach in the fight for decarceration in New York.

But this struggle isn't limited to district attorneys' offices. Although DAs exercise enormous discretion over how the law is implemented, they are bound by parameters set in Albany. They might use the tools they're given in excessive, coercive, and arbitrary ways, but those tools are given to them by the state legislature, and the legislature can take them away. We intend to do just that.

As socialists, we believe that the people should not have to endure the violence and coercion of a market that regards all that's necessary for a dignified life - or even bare survival - as commodities from which the poor and working class can be excluded if they can't afford to pay. As socialists, we also believe that people should not have to endure the violence and coercion of a criminal-legal system that props up the exploitation of the market by surveilling, caging, and killing those fighting to survive under capitalism.

That's why when we're elected, we pledge to support existing decarceral legislation, including:

1. S2101A, to fully eliminate cash bail.
2. S6806, to prohibit police from lying to suspects to extract confessions during interrogations.
3. A654/S2253, to repeal the "walking while trans" ban.
4. A8230/S6419, to decriminalize sex work.
5. A1617B/S1527B, to legalize marijuana.
6. A60/S498, to permit safe injection sites.
7. A2500/S1623, to restrict the use of solitary confinement.
8. S2144, to enact elder parole.
9. S6821, to re-enfranchise incarcerated New Yorkers and all those with prior felony convictions.

We also pledge to introduce new legislation to further the project of decarceration in New York by:

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1. Decriminalizing simple drug possession.
2. Repealing all mandatory minimum sentences.
3. Reducing maximum sentences with retroactive effect.
4. Repeal “bump-up” statutes that allow misdemeanors to be charged as felonies based on past convictions for which sentences have been fully served.
5. Repealing all sentencing enhancements based on predicate felony convictions.
6. Ending police cooperation with ICE.
7. Establishing a sentencing reform commission with a mandate to reduce New York’s incarceration rate to its 1950 level within 10 years.

Finally, we pledge to abide by the principles articulated in the No New Jails Electoral Pledge and fight the construction of new carceral facilities, and advocate for investment in those communities that have been impacted by mass incarceration. New York state spends more than $3 billion every year in maintaining a carceral system that exacerbates interpersonal violence and communal harm instead of preventing them. We will fight to divest from that system and invest in restorative justice instead.

Another world is possible, one where instead of consigning people to the violence of incarceration, we create space for them to heal and thrive. We’ll build that world together, starting right here in New York.